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Mr. Chairman and Honorable members of the House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee, I am providing this testimony today to express support for House Bill No. 482, an act to conserve and manage bison as wildlife in Montana.

I would like to take a brief moment to explain my personal and professional history then get on with my comments:

First and Foremost I am a Montana Hunter and Fisherman and was raised in central Montana.

I am a former employee of MFWP where I conducted wildlife research in Montana for 31 years until my retirement in December 2007. While at MFWP I served on the negotiation team for the State of Montana that crafted the Final Record of Decision for the Interagency Bison Management Plan. As an employee of MFWP I was involved in research on brucellosis in bison and elk from 1989-2004 and published several articles on this disease in scientific journals. I served as Chief of Wildlife Research in my last position with MFWP from 2004-2007.

I have served as chair of the GYIBC technical committee, on the USDA APHIS National Animal Health Surveillance Committee, on the USAHA brucellosis committee, the USAHA brucellosis science and research committee and chaired the Western States Wildlife Health Committee.

I am currently employed as a senior conservation scientist for the Wildlife Conservation Society, one of the oldest conservation organizations in North America (circa 1895), within the North American Program based in Bozeman.

I support this House bill for the following reasons:

- 1) The conservation status of bison across North America was just recently reviewed in 2010. Most bison in North America (96%) are managed in commercial production herds and are privately owned. The status of bison in public herds established for conservation purpose is of great concern to many. The number of bison in North America managed for conservation is actually quite small and these bison face many challenges including genetic pollution, small population size, and a confusing legal status. Sixty-one plains bison and eleven wood bison

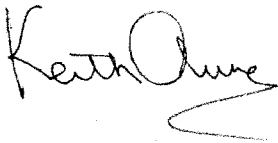
conservation herds were enumerated by the bison specialist group. The total number of plains bison in the conservation herds is about 20,500 animals and Canada is currently reviewing this species to determine if it should be listed under COSEWIC. There are only about 10,300 wood bison and that subspecies is listed as threatened in Canada. There are only 5 bison herds in North America of sufficient size to be ecologically relevant and genetically sustainable, Yellowstone being one of them. Despite the perception that bison are common they are a species very much in need of conservation and there is already at least one pending petition for listing under ESA.

- 2) The State of Montana has a long history of thoughtfully managing wildlife and always advanced a very progressive conservation agenda-a hallmark feature of our state's wildlife legacy. Few people may know that the Montana legislature began passing laws to protect wild game, including bison, as far back as 1864, long before the federal government or private conservation organizations responded to the call for wildlife preservation. Montana is unique in that bison were never removed from game animal status as established by early legislatures although they were given special management status in later legislatures. Montana is currently the only state that considers bison a species of concern in its Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy. These are appropriate designations for this animal and they are consistent with the wonderful conservation history of this great state.
- 3) The bison from and in Yellowstone are highly valued wildlife partly because of their important genetic character and because they could serve as a source stock to build other important conservation herds for hunting and general enjoyment by the public. These bison embody critical genetic material necessary for the long-term conservation of this iconic species. Protecting and conserving the long-term genomic integrity of these bison is essential to the future of this species and to prevent a listing under the Endangered Species Act. This can best be achieved by creating additional satellite herds in North America from this source stock in suitable locations other than in Yellowstone National Park.
- 4) Regarding the perceived risk of disease transmission from wild bison I would like to add these comments.
 - a. Bison as a species have no greater potential to spread disease than any other hoofed ungulate from the wild or livestock for that matter. Most bison herds in North America are not diseased and pose no great risk to agriculture and, in fact, bison, domestic and wild, commonly live along side cattle all across the Nation. Unfortunately the prevailing Montana view of bison remains focused on the Yellowstone experience which is actually a very unique situation in North America and does not represent typical management conditions found elsewhere.
 - b. HB 482 will not prevent the State of Montana from adequately managing the risk for transmission of brucellosis from bison in the Yellowstone ecosystem. The bill would retain the important relationships between APHIS, the Montana Department of Livestock and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to assure that disease prevention is practiced in the Greater Yellowstone Area. Although it may rearrange the various responsibilities for action it will not circumvent obligations outlined in the Interagency Bison Management Plan. In fact, in my estimation it might increase the likelihood of moving the plan in a more productive direction.

- 5) Finally, the principles of wildlife management and conservation science do not support treating these highly valued wild animals fundamentally different than we do other wildlife in Montana. Wildlife are an important public trust and belong to all the people of Montana. Bison are shown to be very manageable as wildlife in many other locations in North America (see attached map). Like other wildlife I understand there will be conflicts between agriculture and bison but there is room for both and means to deal with problems at a local level. Allowing the State of Montana to provide clear options for public trust management of this wildlife species within current wildlife, livestock, MEPA and NEPA statutes is more than adequate to protect Montana's agricultural industry, local economies and include citizen participation in decision making.

A recent survey by the American Bison Society showed that More than 74% of the American Public believes that bison are extremely important living symbol of the American West. Here in Montana we have a unique opportunity to conserve this symbol and do it in a manner that supports local economies. We have a chance to meet the conservation needs of this species while protecting an equally important ranching industry. The truth is, Other states, provinces and Indian Tribes are already showing us the way. Utah just recently reintroduced bison to the Book Cliffs and Alaska is working on a restoration project in the Yukon. These states are building healthy conservation herds that can be experienced by the public in many ways including annual hunts. In another example, ranchers in Saskatchewan formed their own stewardship group to determine how best they can live with bison near Prince Albert National Park. They are now engaged in conservation planning with the stakeholders working cooperatively. Many Indian Tribes are working hard to establish cultural herds on the large landscapes they manage while engaging in agriculture and are reconnecting to bison in their own way. All of these efforts share the view that the cooperative conservation of wild bison provides positive benefits to society and economies. We have a unique opportunity to find a way forward with agricultural, local economic and conservation interests being served equally. This bill will help us find that path. It will do so by emphasizing the long tested method of managing wildlife under the North American Model and the conservation history of Montana.

Respectfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Keith Aune', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Keith Aune, MSc Biology and Certified Wildlife Biologist

